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Contextual risk, individualised responses: an assessment of safeguarding responses to nine cases of peer-on-peer abuse

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Abstract

Practitioners, academics and policymakers are increasingly questioning the sufficiency of safeguarding practice in protecting young people from peer-on-peer abuse in England. Using the findings from an in-depth analysis of nine cases where young people either raped or murdered their peers, this article explores approaches to assessing and intervening with those affected by peer-on-peer abuse [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN]. Building upon international calls for a contextual account of abuse between young people, the article identifies a professional struggle to address the interplay between young people's homes and the public and social spaces in which peer-on-peer abuse often manifests. Findings from this study are used to illuminate wider research into peer-on-peer abuse which has indicated a professional inability to: assess young people's behaviours with reference to the contexts in which they occur; change the environmental factors that influence abusive behaviours; and recognise the vulnerability of those who abuse their peers. The article concludes that to effectively respond to peer-on-peer abuse, multi-agency partnerships are required which can identify, assess and intervene with the norms in peer groups, schools and public spaces that can facilitate peer-on-peer abuse and undermine parental capacity to keep young people safe - thereby adopting a more contextual approach to safeguarding adolescents.

Key Practitioner Messages

- Social contexts such as peer groups, schools and neighbourhoods can make young people vulnerable to peer-on-peer abuse [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN]
- Assessing and intervening with young people and families affected by peer-on-peer abuse will not impact upon the social contexts associated to the phenomenon
- Multi-agency partnerships need to intervene with social contexts that, albeit beyond the traditional remit of child protection, facilitate peer-on-peer abuse and undermine the capacity of parents to keep young people safe

Keywords: adolescents, peer-abuse, multi-systemic therapy, safeguarding

Introduction

Concerns about abuse in young people's relationships and peer groups (peer-on-peer abuse) have raised questions regarding the capacity of England's child protection system to safeguard them from significant harm (Barter *et al.*, 2009; HMIC, 2015). At the same time, serious case reviews and inquiries have identified shortcomings in the sufficiency of existing systems in protecting young people as they move through adolescence (Education Select Committee, 2012; Hanson and Holmes, 2015; Johnson, 2013; Ofsted, 2011). Drawing together these two concerns, and building on research into peer-on-peer abuse from England, Australia and the USA (Chung, 2005; Letourneau and Borduin, 2008; Messerschmidt, 2012; Pearce, 2013; Powell, 2010), this article explores safeguarding responses to peer-on-peer abuse using the results of an in-depth study of nine police investigation files where a young person either raped or murdered a peer [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN]. An examination of assessments and interventions from these investigations illustrates professionals:

- failing to consider public/social risks when assessing young people;
- intervening with familial environments when risk is extra-familial;
- overlooking the vulnerability of those who were abusive.

Far from being unique to the files accessed for this study, analysis of multi-agency responses featured in nine investigations brings to life the conceptual limitations of safeguarding practice highlighted in wider research. Discussing

the findings in this light, this article recommends that professionals recognise the limitations of safeguarding practices which focus on familial contexts, and establish multi-agency partnerships to intervene in peer groups, schools and neighbourhoods where peer-on-peer abuse is prevalent.

The nature and scale of peer-on-peer abuse

In recent years, academics and policymakers in England have become progressively concerned with the scale of [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN, i.e. ‘Academics and policymakers in England have become progressively concerned with the scale of [peer-on-peer abuse]’] physical, sexual and emotional abuse in young people’s relationships and peer groups (Child Protection APPG, 2014; MOPAC, 2015); referred to as peer-on-peer abuse for the purposes of this article (and portrayed in wider research to be abuse between young people of a similar age i.e. within three years of one another, in the absence of an agreed definition). Research indicates that a significant minority of young women will be abused by a partner before they reach the age of 18 years (Barter *et al.*, 2009); that a third of child sexual exploitation cases are peer-on-peer (Firmin, 2013; MOPAC, 2015); and that young men have been groomed into victimising their peers, physically, emotionally and sexually (McNaughton Nicholls *et al.*, 2014; Beckett *et al.*, 2013).

In evidencing its nature, international scholars have critiqued accounts of peer-on-peer abuse that fail to document the contexts in which it occurs [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE

MARGIN](Chung, 2005; Letourneau and Borduin, 2008; Melrose, 2013; Messerschmidt, 2012; Pitts, 2008). Whether considering physical abuse in intimate relationships (Barter *et al.*, 2009), sexual exploitation in peer groups (Child Protection APPG, 2014) or gang-related violence (Pitts, 2008), this body of work indicates that, in particular Western cultures, peer groups, schools and neighbourhoods inform the nature of peer-on-peer abuse. It is the response to this individual/context interplay, across different manifestations of peer-on-peer abuse, with which this article is concerned.

While associations between context and individual behaviours are established in the above evidence base, the nature of this interplay remains largely unexplored. Developments in multi-systemic therapy (MST) have sought to intervene with the systems to which a young person is associated. However, MST evaluations are primarily focused on supporting the system of the family, while removing young people from 'delinquent peers' in the absence of evidenced interventions with this system (Letourneau *et al.*, 2013). We are currently without a mechanism for understanding and intervening in all the contexts/systems specific to peer-on-peer abuse [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN] (peer groups, schools and neighbourhoods as well as homes). Instead, one-to-one interventions and assessments, designed to reduce the risky behaviours of individuals, persist in England (Barnardo's, 2011). This article contributes to building such a mechanism for understanding, and engaging with, the contextual nature of peer-on-peer abuse.

Methodology

This study analysed data collected during police investigations into peer-on-peer abuse, asking:

- What is the nature of the interplay between contexts and individual young people, prior to, during, and following incidents of peer-on-peer abuse?
- What are the implications of a contextual conceptualisation of peer-on-peer abuse for safeguarding policy and practice? [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN]

The latter question forms the subject of this article.

A relationship between contexts and abusive incidents had been alluded to in larger scale studies of peer-on-peer abuse (Barter *et al.*, 2009; Beckett *et al.*, 2013), and a case review methodology was suited to providing a detailed exploration of how that relationship manifested during incidents (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Cases were identified from police investigations. Although the study's questions related to safeguarding, investigation files were accessed because:

- Peer-on-peer abuse is often managed by criminal justice agencies (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2013; Gadd *et al.*, 2013);
- Criminal justice agencies also have a safeguarding role;
- Police forces operate in the public spaces where peer-on-peer abuse occurs;
- Police investigations gather information on escalation, motives and the relationships between those involved – all factors pertinent to a contextual account of the phenomenon;

- Multiple organisations, including children's services, contributed to both building a case for the prosecution and identifying the welfare needs of those involved.

Although variable depending on the scale of the investigation, files largely contained:

- Statements
- Police reports for each young person including going missing, offending and domestic abuse incidents
- CCTV footage, social media and phone records
- Minutes from meetings, including strategy and child protection meetings
- School reports
- Children's social care and youth offending assessments
- Emails between professionals within multi-agency partnerships sent during the investigations.

Case file sampling

Cases/investigations were drawn from an opportune sample [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN]. One police service was contacted who had an interest in improving their response to peer-on-peer abuse. For the purposes of expediency it was decided that, given their relatively large size and engagement in the work, cases would be randomly sampled from them as a single service, once certain selection criteria had been applied.

There were four components to the selection criteria.

Firstly, cases had to fall within the following definition: *'Physical, sexual, emotional and financial abuse, and coercive control, exercised within young people's relationships'*. While a range of offences, such as assault and kidnap, could be used when interpreting this definition, the selection process only sampled 'murder' and 'rape' files [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN] using police force categories of 'multiple perpetrator rape', 'domestic abuse homicide' and 'serious youth violence homicide'. These offences fall within the parameters of the selection criteria, and while they are not representative of most peer-on-peer abuse cases, being the most harmful/serious manifestations of the phenomenon, consultation with the participating police service suggested that these investigations would:

- document a range of abusive behaviours on the pathway to the rape/murder;
- have required detailed investigations from which information on social contexts could be generated – as opposed to common assault investigations which may be relatively short and not fully explore the contexts in which the assault occurred.

Secondly, in England and Wales, agencies have a statutory duty to safeguard young people up to their 18th birthday and hold them criminally responsible for their actions from the age of 10. As a result, 'young people' were defined as those aged 10-17 for the purposes of this study [PUBLISHER – THE

PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN], and cases were only selected where the ages of all individuals involved fell within this parameter.

Thirdly, research implies that peer-on-peer abuse is a gendered phenomenon (i.e. Barter *et al.*, 2009), differently impacting young men and young women. In order to consider this proposition, cases were only selected if they involved both young men and young women, and sampling methodologies (outlined below) also ensured that the overall sample contained examples of both young men and young women being victimised and victimising others.

Finally, cases were selected that occurred between 2007 – 2012 [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN], enabling both a consideration of whether responses changed over the five years and for outcomes to be tracked post-conviction.

From these criteria a cohort of cases were identified, as presented in Table 1, and it was from this available selection that they were sampled.

INSERT TABLE 1

Starting with the rape files, of the 47 cases involving a female suspect the 23rd was selected, being numerically in the middle of available selection. Of the remaining 805 rape cases every 160th case was selected yielding a further three gang-associated cases and two non-gang associated cases spanning the time period. Of the seven domestic abuse files the third case was selected, being numerically in the middle. As this involved a female complainant and was not gang-associated the other two cases were selected from the 10 serious youth

violence files that included at least one female suspect (the fourth and eight case), one of which was gang-associated and one that was not.

In total nine cases were selected - three murder cases and six multiple-perpetrator rape cases [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN, i.e. ‘Three murder cases and six multiple-perpetrator rape cases [were selected]’]. As murder was far less frequent than rape, half the number of murder files was selected. It was decided that if, following initial analysis, the dataset was insufficient to draw thematic conclusions further cases would be selected. However, files contained far more data than anticipated and were sufficient for the purposes of this exploratory study.

Framework for data collection and analysis

Bourdieu’s social theory of structure and agency (Bourdieu, 1992), Jenks’ theory of childhood (Jenks, 2005) and Connell’s theory of masculinities (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) were synthesised to produce a framework for data collection and analysis. This framework recognised:

- an individual/context interplay whereby individual agency is informed by, and informs, the environments within which it interacts (Bourdieu, 1992);
- young people as developing through a dependency on a range of social contexts (Jenks, 2005);
- many social contexts as gendered, where harmful gender norms can be reinforced and/or challenged by social agents within them (Connell and

Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2012). (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2012)

For the purposes of data collection, this theoretical position was used to design a case file template. The template was split into three sections which, taken together, would document the actions of individuals, the contexts in which they occurred, and the safeguarding response to both of these components.

The template provided a means to consistently capture and organise the data from each investigation in a uniform structure ahead of analysis. Documents in each file were reviewed twice. On their second review data from each were transferred onto a template. Evidence in the files yielded data on 145 young people, 160 households, 21 peer groups, 30 schools and nine local authorities [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN] associated to nine investigations. Of the 145 young people, 76 were suspects, 9 were complainants, 45 were witnesses and the remaining 15 were classified as other (young people related to complainants or suspects with some association to the investigation). The terms ‘complainant’, ‘suspect’ and ‘witness’ is used throughout the paper as this was the primary terminology within each file. This categorisation also avoids prescribing a static victim status to any specific individual – an approach to conceptualising victimisation critiqued in peer-on-peer abuse research (Melrose, 2013) – and gives conceptual space to recognise the victimisation of suspects. At the time of the incident, complainants were aged 11-16 [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN], two were young men and

seven were young women; the 76 suspects were aged 13-17 and 92 per cent were young men.

Analysis explored the interplay between the contexts and individual behaviours recorded in each template, and the extent to which safeguarding responses engaged with this interplay. Nodes were created in NVivo (122) and variables in SPSS (74 for the cases and 121 related to the individuals and contexts in each case) to explore: the nature of each context; individual/context interplay; and interplay between contexts. For example, for each context (home, peer group, school, and neighbourhood) nodes and variables were created to capture evidence of physical abuse. SPSS data was used to count the number of young people in each case that encountered physical abuse in their neighbourhood, for example, along with the number of responses to these neighbourhoods etc. whereas NVivo data was used to provide a qualitative exemplification of those findings. Findings were then organised for each individual, in each case, as outlined in Table 2. Each of these was then linked to provide a contextual overview for each case.

INSERT TABLE 2

Limitations and ethics

The limitations to this study are referenced where relevant throughout the paper but also warrant attention here. The small number of cases used are not intended to be representative of all peer-on-peer abuse incidents [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN] and should not be viewed as such. Rather, the study sought to explore the

contextual nature of peer-on-peer abuse implied in wider research through analysis of individual incidents. Cases were selected from one police service area and may not reflect safeguarding practices elsewhere. And finally, while multi-agency documents featured in investigation files, it is likely that some information on wider safeguarding responses to each case were not included. In order to address these two latter points the study's findings are discussed with reference to wider research rather than considered in isolation.

This study was independently reviewed and approved by an ethical board at the author's academic institution in addition to gaining approval through the ethical processes of the participating police service. Given the sensitive subject matter, a number of issues required attention, including consent, security, the anonymity of professionals and young people featured in the files and the limitations of confidentiality, researcher welfare and the parameters of data protection. These matters were considered during the ethics approval procedures, were under review throughout the study and continue to be so for publications. As a result, full details of the cases have not been reproduced in any publication, and the amount of detail that can be given about any individual case is limited [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN]: published material largely provides a thematic account of all cases.

Findings: the professional response to nine peer-on-peer abuse incidents

A range of agencies featured in the nine files (Table 3).

INSERT TABLE 3

This paper presents findings on two aspects of the collective response of these agencies to nine incidents of peer-on-peer abuse: assessment and investigation; followed by interventions and outcomes.

Assessment and investigation

Files detailed the investigation for each case and the assessments of risk that were undertaken during the process. While files may not have held every assessment used in each case, those that featured failed to:

- look beyond the behaviours of complainants and their families or explore the contexts in which young people had actually been abused;
- compliment contextual investigation processes.

Focus of assessments

Professionals identified that rape complainants were at risk in their neighbourhoods [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN] (bold added by author):

G1 was in '**imminent and serious danger** in current circumstances.

Required removal from social and home environment' (Case 5).

'[A] move must be facilitated so that the family can leave [the local area] and avoid all possible threats and recrimination' (Case 4).

However, on both of these occasions, although professionals knew that abuse had occurred in peer groups, schools, or local neighbourhoods, neither these locations, nor their interplay with one another and individual young people, were

considered during child protection assessments. Assessments focused on the ability of young people, and their families, to avoid abusive peer groups, schools or neighbourhoods, rather than the ability of professionals to make those environments safer [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN, i.e. ‘Assessments focused on the ability of young people... to avoid abusive peer groups..., rather than the ability of professionals to make those environments safer’]. ‘Incapacity to parent’ was the reason given for the placement of two young women in foster care, who were both voluntarily accommodated under section 20 of the Children Act 1989. This decision concentrated on the responsibility of parents/carers to keep young people away from suspects, and did not consider the responsibility of professionals to address the ways that suspects were undermining the capacity of parents to keep complainants safe.

Comparatively, beyond the use of bail conditions to restrict contact with complainants, little attention was paid in assessments to risk posed to or by suspects and their families. In files, risks faced by suspects, some of which may have influenced their offending, were evidently unaddressed during investigations. While waiting for their trials to commence, suspects in six cases were returned to homes where they had been exposed to domestic abuse, neglect or other child protection issues.

In sum, assessments during investigations concentrated on the behaviours of individuals (largely complainants) and parental capacity to safeguard. This focus implied it was young people’s choices to place themselves in risky contexts [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR

THE MARGIN], along with parental influence over these choices, and not the contexts themselves, that needed to be addressed – thereby splitting context and agency rather addressing the interplay between them. Yet, when a complainant was sexually harassed when choosing to attend school, or a suspect had their phone stolen when they chose to travel on the bus, their choices were only risky if the norms within those respective schools or buses were themselves unsafe - and were not 'risky' in isolation of the contexts to which they were related.

Contextual investigations vs. individual assessments

Investigations gathered evidence from contexts in which abuse occurred. Peer groups that were associated to the abusive incidents were interviewed in eight cases. The public nature of most incidents required investigators to use:

- CCTV evidence (5 cases)
- Phone evidence (7 cases)
- Computer evidence (5 cases)
- Peer group discussions via social media (4 cases).

However, as assessments had not engaged with the peer groups, schools and public spaces from where this evidence had been drawn, the investigation process incurred delays and on occasion elevated risks.

On seven occasions parental permission for young people to give evidence was withdrawn/refused due to concerns about safety [PUBLISHER – THE

PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN]in school or the neighbourhood. Witness or complainant intimidation (five cases) was, at least in part, associated to persisting harm within contexts that had not been subject to assessment:

B10 was threatened online by multiple individuals, following the service of papers to the defendants (Case 1, rape, witness)

8G4 was punched in the face by a girl in her [school] year for spreading rumours. (Case 8, murder, friend of complainant)

All six rape complainants were threatened, and three were physically assaulted, by other young people in a bid to get them to withdraw statements:

3G1 [complainant] was assaulted outside school... while waiting for the committal hearing. Assaulted by a group of females who dragged her outside the home of G14 [suspect] stating 'this is the slag that cried rape'. (Case 3)

All such incidents occurred in public, social environments, whereas complainants and witnesses were relatively safe in their homes during the investigations.

Interventions and outcomes

Like assessments, interventions recorded in the files largely targeted complainants and their homes with little attention paid to other environmental factors or suspects.

Interventions with individuals and families

Across all nine cases, complainants and/or their families received some form of intervention [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN]. Counselling was offered to all six rape complainants and the families of all three murder victims. In addition, a ‘relationships, negotiating skills and self-esteem programme’ was offered to one complainant and mental health interventions to four. Three complainants were relocated, in one case with their family and in two others through foster care; four complainants moved schools. No complainants were made subject to a child protection plan.

The response to suspects was predominantly rooted in the criminal justice system. Of the 76 suspects, 91 per cent were arrested, 71 per cent were charged, and 58 per cent were convicted and incarcerated. No suspects were made subject to a child protection plan [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN].

Non-government organisations provided one-to-one support to five rape complainants and mentoring services for one complainant and for suspects in four cases (three rapes and one murder).

Of all families, it was those of suspects who led abusive incidents where the study most readily identified risk. Yet files indicated that they received little intervention as a result of the investigation and for the most part remained unchanged. This was despite 25 per cent of suspects’ parents asking for help and evidence that close to half (46%) were struggling to keep suspects safe.

Comparatively, far more attention was paid to the homes of complainants. It seems that where harm within homes may have featured on the pathway

towards the abusive incident, for example in the homes of lead suspects, little intervention was made. Whereas when homes were impacted by external factors, such as those of complainants, intervention focused on the home and not the environments that posed a risk [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN].

Contextual interventions – peer groups, schools and neighbourhoods

Albeit limited, individual and familial interventions were far more common than those targeted at the contexts associated to the abusive incidents

Peer group environments were the ones in which harm was most consistently identified in the study. However, in keeping with MST evaluations, peer groups experienced intervention through disruption as opposed to support, mainly through contact restrictions in suspects' bail conditions. There is no evidence that peer groups were supported to challenge harmful norms [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN] or that positive peer influence was built upon as a means of intervention.

Despite harmful gendered norms/behaviours within schools being associated with abusive incidents in eight cases, files contained only one example of an attempt to change school cultures following an abusive incident. There was no evidence of interventions to either address harmful norms within the neighbourhoods in which two murders and four rapes took place or their continued impact on residents.

Case file evidence suggests that environmental risk was addressed via the management of individuals:

- Restrictions were placed on contact between suspects, and between suspects and complainants, to address risk within peer groups.
- In eight cases young people were moved to different schools
- Four rape cases, and two murder cases, involved neighbourhood relocation of witnesses and/or complainants

All of these approaches to risk management were exemplified in Case 3:

Following the sexual assault on school premises the complainant stays away from school for two weeks. Upon her return, she is kept away from suspects prior to charge. Following charge, attempts are made to keep all suspects out of school but this cannot be implemented, so bail conditions forbid contact between all suspects. The complainant is physically assaulted in school by other students in a bid to get her to withdraw her statement and as a result she moves and leaves the school before the trial commences. Following the trial two of the suspects are incarcerated. No changes are made to the school environment during this time.

Outcomes – the persistence of contextual risk

The contextual nature of the abusive incidents and the individualised nature of the professional response adversely impacted outcomes for young people in eight of the nine cases. It is of note that a rape case where the complainant met the suspects online is the one case where environmental risk appears to be less of a factor. Although a peer group was involved in the offence, they were all incarcerated. It does not appear that any other peers, schools or public places

were directly associated with the incident. In this case risk did not persist beyond the investigation.

In the remaining eight cases, a lack of interventions within the homes of suspects arguably resulted in at least 43 per cent experiencing harm in the home environment during the investigation. Where information was available (n=6 cases), peer groups involved in the perpetration of offences re-formed following the abusive incident, and harm continued [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN]; in the other three cases suspects remain incarcerated.

Convicting and/or relocating young people did not create safety in contexts associated to the abusive incidents. In six cases bystanders, who were peers of the complainants or suspects, experienced ongoing harm in their local area. In six cases harm also continued in schools: for example, students continued to experience physical abuse and sexual harassment in schools featured in two rape cases and one murder case. Rather than create safe environments, and challenge the harmful norms that dominated the contexts in question, complainants were moved and these fields were left unsafe for those young people who remained within them.

Files also indicated that some complainants continued to be victimised, or began harming others [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN], following the investigations:

[Since the convictions] 5G1 has been raped on repeated occasions, continues to go missing, has sustained physical injuries... 5G1 went

missing from foster care. When 5G1 returned she disclosed that she and her friends had gone to a party with some boys... The next day another boy arrived and asked if she wanted to celebrate her birthday by having sex with him. She said no but he vaginally raped her anyway. She did not stop him as this is something that happens in the gang culture that she mixes with. (Case 5)

School records show that 6G1 becomes depressed in school, cries and writes on her books that she wants to die. On one occasion she is also verbally abusive to the teacher. (Case 6)

Although convictions were achieved, abusive behaviours and the harmful norms that underpinned them persisted in the school in Case 6, and the peer group in Case 5. As Table 4 illustrates intervention, and even convictions, did not necessarily equate with safeguarding.

INSERT TABLE 4

Discussion – contextual vulnerability, individualised responses

It could be argued that the challenges identified in this study are unique to the nine investigations under examination, and conclusions about safeguarding practice in England and other countries more broadly cannot be considered. If discussed in isolation this would be true. However, these findings exemplify, and give depth to, wider critiques of safeguarding practice emerging from serious case reviews and current policy and practice guidance [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN, i.e. 'These findings exemplify... wider critiques of safeguarding practice emerging

from serious case reviews and current policy and practice guidance'] (Corby *et al.*, 2012; Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2013; Johnson, 2013; Ofsted, 2011) which collectively highlight key shortcomings illustrated by the findings of this paper.

Research and reviews into child sexual exploitation in England (Jay, 2014; Pearce, 2013), and previous studies into gang-associated neighbourhoods (Catch 22, 2013; Pitts, 2008) have evidenced how young people's choices have been perceived by professionals as causing the abuse they experience: a thematic finding in keeping with the individualised assessments documented in this article. While police investigations drew evidence from peer groups, schools and neighbourhoods to build a case about the murders and rapes in question, the assessments of young people involved failed to recognise the significance of their relationships with these same social spaces.

Wider research has illustrated that young people will often act in ways that appear risky in order to 'survive' abusive contexts (Hallsworth and Young, 2011; Pearce, 2013)(Hallsworth & Young, 2011; Pearce, 2013). In failing to assess the interplay between agency and context in the cases under consideration, professionals were left with the impression that risk was solely the product of young people's behaviours [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN, i.e. 'In failing to assess the interplay between agency and context..., professionals were left with the impression that risk was solely the product of young people's behaviours'], and not the relationship between contexts and the behaviours that occurred within them.

Contextless assessments of abuse featured in the files made way for individualised intervention – an approach in-line with existing child protection processes in England that were never intended to change the public socio-cultural environments that are associated with peer-on-peer abuse and which undermine parental capacity to safeguard (Featherstone *et al.*, 2014; Parton, 2015). Inspection reports (Ofsted, 2013), Government initiated reviews (Munro, 2011) and broader child protection research (Corby *et al.*, 2012) all indicate that child protection professionals should focus on young people and their families. However, interventions with families and individuals (albeit in keeping with policy frameworks) did not affect the peer groups, schools and/or neighbourhoods associated to the abusive incidents in which young people remained unsafe in eight of the nine cases.

When young people in the files behaved in ways that were perceived as putting themselves or others at risk, and families were unable to control this escalation, safeguarding partnerships failed to consider their role in creating the social conditions required for a young person to act differently [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN]. The closest that the response got to recognising the impact of environments was the use of relocation. However, this only applied to complainants and witnesses, and sent a message to those who remained that their peer groups, schools or neighbourhoods could not be made safe.

Despite their limitations, the reservation of safeguarding interventions for complainants in the cases is indicative of the fact that responses to young people who abuse their peers in the UK remain under-developed in policy and

practice (Gadd *et al.*, 2013; Hackett, 2014). In 2003 calls were made for the Government to develop a harmful sexual behaviour strategy (Hackett 2014) – over a decade later one is yet to emerge. Researchers have critiqued the lack of a welfare response to young people who have physically abused partners and/or peers (Beckett *et al.*, 2013; Gadd *et al.*, 2013) and the tensions of safeguarding those who pose a risk to others (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2013; Ofsted, 2011). The fact that responses in the nine cases neither recognised the vulnerability of suspects, nor identified how interventions with suspects (that went beyond criminal justice sanctions) could safeguard those affected, is symptomatic of these pre-existing critiques.

Taken together, these three limitations (an inability to assess contextually, reshape abusive contexts, and safeguard young people who abuse others [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN]) suggest the need for a fundamental change in policy and practice in England, and arguably in other Western contexts in which safeguarding practices are largely limited to work with young people and their families. Building on the theoretical premises of MST (Letourneau and Borduin, 2008) it is critical that safeguarding practices are extended to assess and intervene with all the social systems associated to peer-on-peer abuse [PUBLISHER – THE PRECEDING UNDERLINED WORDS ARE FOR THE MARGIN]. Such a ‘contextual safeguarding’ approach requires multi-agency partnerships of professionals and communities responsible for the environments in which peer-on-peer abuse occurs – housing estates, shopping centres, parks, youth clubs and schools amongst others. In essence bringing together community safety

and traditional safeguarding partners to create public environments in which the social conditions are such that peer-on-peer abuse cannot occur. By twinning existing one-to-one interventions with those that change the environments in which young people's behaviours can create a risk of significant harm, safeguarding practice would be equipped to respond effectively to the individual/context interplay identified in this study. Such an approach could create a climate in which, young people are held accountable for their actions, and professionals (and the wider public) are held accountable for creating the world in which those actions occur.

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Contextual risk, individualised responses: an assessment of safeguarding responses to nine cases of peer-on-peer abuse

Table 1 Complaints sampled for the study

Offences (January 2007 – December 2012)	Total no.	Gang- associated	Female Complainant 10-17 year olds	Female Suspect 10-17 year olds	Male Complainant 10-17 year olds	Male Suspect 10-17 year olds
Multiple perpetrator rape	806	8.6% (n=69)	96.80% (n=780)	5.80% (n=47)	1.74% (n =14)	76.80% (n=619)
Murder: teenage relationship abuse	7	14.2% (n=1)	85.7% (n=6)	14.2% (n=1)	14.2% (n=1)	85.7% (n=6)
Murder: serious youth violence	87	39.1% (n=34)	11.5% (n=10)	20.7% (n=10)	89.6% (n=78)	95.4% (n=83)

Note: Complainant and suspect figures do not total the number of cases due to gaps and duplications.

Table 2 Example of contextual framework for organising and analysing case file data

Case Number 03	Suspect 1	Response
Home 1	Exposure to domestic abuse	None
Peer Group 1	Sexually offend together Share abusive images Commit robberies together	Bail conditions forbid contact
School 1	Sexual harassment identified by students Complaints regarding bullying	Suspects excluded – no other action taken
Neighbourhood 1	Young men experience robbery in local parks and on buses	No action taken in association with investigation

Table 3 Recorded evidence of young people's contact with services

Service	Young people recorded as being in contact with the service prior to the offence		Young people recorded as being in contact with the service during the investigation	
	N	%	N	%
Education	107	74.4	91	62.7
Police	79	54.5	56	38.6
Children's social care	18	12.4	7	4.8
Youth justice	27	18.5	20	13.8
Housing	12	8.3	3	2.1

Sexual health	2	1.4	1	0.7
Mental health	3	2.1	2	1.4

Table 4 Individual intervention, prosecution outcome and contextual outcome

	Complainant	Suspects	Homes	Peers	Schools	Neighbourhoods	Prosecution
Case 1	Relocation Counselling	Bail conditions Mentoring	Complainant family relocation One suspect taken into care DV concerns remain	Peer group reunited	Unknown	Rape 'hotspot' remains Becomes increasingly unsafe for complainant and witnesses	All
Case 2	Counselling	Bail conditions	No evidence of ongoing harm	Unknown – remain in custody	No evidence of ongoing harm	Rape 'hotspot' remains	All
Case 3	School move Counselling	Bail conditions	CP issues remain for suspects	Safe peer groups fracture	Sexual bullying remains	Becomes increasingly unsafe for complainant	All
Case 4	Relocation Counselling	Bail conditions	Section 20 for complainant CP issues continue for suspects	Peer group reunited	Sexual bullying remains	Gang-affected Robbery Rape hotspot remains	Some
Case 5	Relocation Counselling Mentoring	Bail conditions Mentoring	Section 20 for complainant	Peer group reunited	Sexual bullying remains	Gang-affected Robbery Rape hotspot remains	Some
Case 6	Counselling	Bail conditions Mentoring	CP issues continue for suspects	Peer group reunited	Sexual bullying remains	Robbery	All
Case 7	Deceased	Bail conditions Mentoring	Counselling for complainant family CP issues remain for suspects	Peer group reunited	Attempt by school to address cultural concerns	Unknown	Some
Case 8	Deceased	Bail conditions	Counselling for complainant family	Bullying and physical violence	Bullying and physical violence remain	Physical violence and robbery persists	All
Case 9	Deceased	Bail conditions	Counselling for complainant family CP issues continue for suspects	DV and harmful attitudes	Unknown	Gang-affected Robbery	All